The Startling Disparity between Nature and City in Norwegian Landscapes

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Introduction – the unsurpassed potential

Consider the treasure trove of natural beauty that is Norway. I believe anyone who devotes even a small amount of time to the unbiased exploration of this country, will be brought to agree that Norway has been endowed with an extraordinary collection of landscapes, and that this inheritance provides, or could have provided, the inhabitants of this country with some of the most excellent, most varied and most enchanting theaters for human settlements imaginable. Whether one looks at the spectacular fjords of Norway's West, the gentle, bountifully wooded countryside of Norway's East, or the lush, river-adorned valleys and the vast highlands of the Norwegian inlands, I think most people considering the matter will concur that Norway is in possession of some of the most sublime and inspiring scenery, and therefore also of some of the best possible stages for the construction of built environments, anywhere in the world.

The perplexing dissonance between the natural and the built environments

Yet, for some obscure reason, the inhabitants, architects and decision makers of Norway have rarely, if ever, taken full advantage of this almost unrivaled potential. In countless cases, it has not only been ignored, but squandered, and this bewildering behavior is, as is evident from both recent building projects and emerging construction sites, not only continuing unabated, but becoming increasingly widespread, intrusive and undisputed.

As William Camden (1551–1623) once stated, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. In spite of the prodigious amounts of highly polished rhetoric regarding “urban development” in recent years, countless Norwegian towns and cities, large and small, have long been and continue to be astoundingly ugly, chaotic, disjointed, desolate and uninteresting. Many of them are, in one word, repulsive. Yet ample numbers of people journey through them almost every day, outwardly unaffected by the visual mayhem that surrounds them.

This mystifying circumstance is also a deeply tragic one. Instead of being the complementary environments, the jewels of their respective landscapes, that they could have been, an increasing number of Norwegian towns and cities constitute little more in terms of beauty, art and architecture than aesthetic disaster zones – visual Chernobyls – which pollute the landscapes they occupy in much the same way as open sewers pollute winds and water courses.

Moreover, this contamination by way of built environments is generally left entirely unmitigated, even when it stems from developments several decades old, and when simple alterations or additions could have significantly lessened its impact. Hence, it is often allowed to spoil the locations in question in the most abhorrent and impudent ways.

This dissonance between the majority of Norwegian towns and cities, and the God-given or natural milieu that exists around them, is often so colossal and grotesque, so baffling and needless, that anyone unfamiliar with Norwegian culture and character could be forgiven for thinking that at least some of the inhabitants of these aesthetic wastelands are acutely aware of the unfortunate situation, and that these enlightened citizens are devoting a significant share of their time and energy to remedying it, or to avoiding a future exacerbation of it.

Time is, after all, one of the goods the majority of Norwegians are plentifully supplied with, since few other peoples in the world enjoy such short workdays and such a multitude of holidays. Moreover, the actual work week has *in practice*, generally speaking, been reduced to four days, even though Friday is still officially a work day.

However, an intimate observation of such wastelands over time, will likely force even the most naïve and optimistic visitor to come to terms with the melancholic reality – namely that such concerned and committed citizens are an exceedingly rare phenomenon, and that many locations are, or appear to be, entirely deprived of them.

Granted – some ordinary, “anonymous” people do occasionally morph into protesters and even activists when some particularly outrageous project threatens their local milieu. However, once the project in question has been brought to a halt, or, as more commonly happens, has been opposed for a while without substantial results, these isolated clusters of protestors tend to melt away as quickly as they appeared, while all the other large and small projects near and far continue uninterrupted, and the overarching direction of change remains precisely the same.

Searching for explanations: Natural beauty – a catalyst for urban ugliness?

Since I first began noticing the above mentioned disparity – the remarkable lack of any kind of correspondence between the God-given and the manmade, which in Norway is so depressingly pervasive – I have often asked myself whether there is some causal relationship between these two extremes of beauty and ugliness.

In other words – could the needless unsightliness, the aesthetic aridity and the poor quality that characterize so much of that which is manmade in Norway, be the physical manifestation of an invisible psychological rebellion against the unattainable splendor of the natural environment?

While contemplating this, I am reminded of such metaphysical themes as the seeming dependence of a given quality upon its opposite for its existence, the difficulty we have in thinking about anything except in term of contrasts, and the legendary revolt of the Evil One – begun because of his inability to accept the role of a servant any longer, even though he was the servant of God himself.

To delve deeper into this fascinating, but perhaps superfluous question: Could the presence of such beautiful natural scenery as is almost ubiquitous in much of Norway, in a sense be the cause of the remarkable lack of interest in making the manmade pleasing to the eye? If so, the darker of the proclivities of human nature would be the real cause, as nature alone cannot cause anything to be built in opposition to her. In that case, we would be looking at an instance of the disturbing phenomenon eloquently identified by the English philosopher Roger Scruton – a phenomenon we might call “the desire to desecrate the beautiful”.

Another, related question also comes to the fore. Could the near total absence of any truly monumental buildings, new or old, be the result of the fact that many Norwegians are surrounded by monumental nature? Could it be that many Norwegians think along such lines as these: “There are so many splendid natural environments around us. Do we need splendid architecture also? Our towns and cities will never reach a state where they equal the complexity, the grandeur and the permanence of those natural environments anyway. Let us therefore be humble, steer away from the extravagant, and use our limited resources as sparingly as possible.”

If that is a common view among Norwegians, I believe they are sorely mistaken. Nor do I have much faith in the “desecration of nature”-hypothesis. The case of capital city of Oslo – today surely one of the ugliest capitals in the world – suggests that something else must be involved, as there as little monumental or even beautiful nature in the immediate vicinity of Oslo.

Was it always like this?

What, then, could be causing this dire situation? What could be causing this insolent assault on the senses, this absence of accord with time-honored aesthetic standards, this revolting barbarism in the midst of one of the most important fields of human endeavor?

To answer that question, I believe it will be necessary to answer the following one: Was it always like this? Have Norwegian settlements always proclaimed the same kind of disregard for the orderly and the harmonious, the beautiful and the sublime, the deliberate and the refined? Have they always displayed such utter indifference to the idea of making buildings worthy of admiration – buildings that posterity is likely to consider great achievements?

My preliminary reply is this: To the extent that the increasingly scant remains of the architecture of former ages, as well as the records of such architecture in archives, books and galleries, provide us with evidence sufficient to form a truthful opinion of the aesthetic merits of those ages, the answer to that question has to be a fairly definite “no”. It was *not* always like this. The vandalism by way of architecture, or rather *anti-architecture*, has in our age reached a frequency and a pitch which earlier times were quite unfamiliar with.

The proof of this can, as already indicated, be found in several places – in the still fairly plentiful old city centers, where clusters of buildings, and in some cases entire streets, have been preserved – in rural villages where little has changed in generations, in the stately homes and manors that still adorn the countryside in certain regions – and in the photographs, drawings and paintings of buildings and vistas that once existed.

This evidence tends to speak of a manner of thinking very different from the one that now pervades society – of a collection of traditions and ideals that has nearly been forgotten, and that, when occasionally remembered, is no longer valued, but seen through a distorting lens of scorn, ridicule and lying by omission.

In a later essay, I shall examine some of this evidence in detail. For the present, let us assume that it is convincing.

If it was not always like this – when did the present situation commence?

The logical next question, then, is this: Since there clearly was a time when the present situation did not exist – when did the change occur? When did

the appalling avalanches that swept away nearly all classical aesthetic awareness come roaring down the Norwegian hillsides? Something akin to a series of avalanches did clearly take place, but when – and why? Did it happen suddenly, or only gradually? Can we pin down the transition to a certain year, or do we need to measure it in decades or centuries?

Again, the available evidence appears to speak quite clearly. The major avalanches occurred in the twentieth century, and they were set in motion around 1920 or 1930. By the 1960, they were wreaking terrible havoc all over the country, forming a wave of destruction that can only be compared to carpet bombing.

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Still, the question of when the shift began, and the related question of *why* it began, may not be as easy to answer adequately as the above statement seems to indicate. Architecture is, after all, the physical manifestations of immaterial human thought. Any reply to the questions of when and why will therefore have to include an investigation of the history of ideas pertaining to the practice of architecture.

For now, I leave the reader to ponder such questions unassisted.

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Sources and further reading

Scruton, Roger 2009, *Beauty*, Oxford University Press

Scruton, Roger 2014, *The Soul of the World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey